Travelling Teens:

A parents' guide to family relocation

Pam Linke

Australian Government
Department of Defence

Early Childhood Australia Inc

About the author

Pam Linke

Pam Linke is the Parenting Manager for Child and Youth Health in South Australia. Child and Youth Health has developed a state-wide program to support parents using books and their website www.cyh.com. Pam trained as a social worker and has done further studies in children's literature and early education. She is widely respected for her professional knowledge and has written a number of books for parents, including *Parenting at home and away, Let's stop bullying, Pants aren't rude* (Children's sexual development) and *Learning about feelings*. Pam is currently the Chairperson of Early Childhood Australia's Publications Committee.

About Early Childhood Australia

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Series Editor Sue Wales

Publications Assistant Rebecca Meston

Marketing David Kingwell, Amanda Mcdonald

Graphic Design Claire Connelly

Cover Photograph Andrew Sikorski

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Membership, subscription & advertising inquiries:

Early Childhood Australia Inc.
PO Box 7105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (02) 6242 1800
Fax: (02) 6242 1818
Sales line (toll free): 1800 356 900
Email: eca@earlychildhood.org.au

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Contents

Foreword

This book has been made possible through the goodwill and sharing of stories, experiences and ideas from Australian Defence Force (ADF) parents and young people across Australia. The Australian Defence Force is one of the careers where moving house is very common, and ADF families have skills, wisdom and understanding that are shared in this book. The quotes all come from parents and young people interviewed in researching the book. In doing the research I also used a questionnaire to gather some idea of what matters most, and the results of this are included in the book. Although most of the experiences gathered in this book come from ADF families, they are embedded in the understanding about young people that comes from my practice as a counsellor and from worldwide research about young people. The information is relevant to any young people who have to move house, from whatever walks of life

I thank the following people who made this all possible:

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Moira Joyce, Social worker, Child and Youth Health

The families who appear in the photographs

Especially I thank the young people who gave me their time and their wisdom. They have contributed very largely to the book and were most encouraging in their enthusiasm and helpfulness. Many said they appreciated that the book was being written to help them. Some wrote on their survey forms things like the following comment from a 14-year-old girl: *'I think it's a great idea to do this book.'*

Their comments show both their willingness to offer their ideas and the things they have learned about moving. They are also optimistic that what they have told me about what they need will help to make a difference.

Note: Except where specifically stated, the information in this book applies to young people of both sexes. 'He' and 'she' are used alternatively as singular pronouns.

Pam Linke

Introduction

Moving house because of parents' work is becoming more and more common, not only for careers such as the Australian Defence Force, oil companies and banks, but for many people who want to get on, or find work in a particular sphere.

Moving house with teenagers isn't easy and there are no easy answers. As with everything, some manage well and others not so well. Adolescence is a time of sexual maturation, consolidating friendships, testing values, developing a new sense of self, finishing school years and planning for the future. All of these huge changes are more easily done in a predictable, known and safe setting.

Moving house adds another set of changes on top of these. Many families, for different reasons, do need to move, and this book is about helping families to make the most of the experience and to have some strategies for coping with problems that might arise. It starts with an overview of what adolescence means to young people, and it is important to keep this in mind as the basis of relating to them about all issues. With each challenge that comes up when moving with young people we need to think about what it means in relation to the changes of adolescence.

In today's world we know much more about people and what helps and what hinders wellbeing, so we take more time and trouble to make things work well, where in the past we often just did what we had to and let the children cope as they could. A grandmother was talking to her daughter about her concerns about the coming move with grandchildren. Her daughter replied: *'But you never worried when you did it to us, Mum.'*

Moving in adolescence is not only a challenge but also an opportunity. It is an opportunity to learn new skills and to experience achievements that will stand young people in good stead for the rest of their lives. If young people have had childhood experiences of supportive parenting and a stable parenting relationship they will have the confidence and ability to be able to cope with the changes. You can hang on to that when times are tough—knowing that the groundwork you have done before is still there even if you can't see it at the time. Young people can get great benefits from moving, new learnings and skills that will last a lifetime. This can also build on the strengths they already have and develop more skills and personal resources as they go along.

This book is about finding what is positive about moving, coping with the challenges and learning new life skills. The quotes in italics throughout the book are the words of the young people I interviewed.

One thing that stood out for me as I interviewed young people was that, even when they did not enjoy having to move, almost every person said they would not change from being in an ADF family.


WHAT IF?

The first step

Before we discuss what it means to move house with teenagers, we need to understand what is happening for them at this important time of their lives. The changes that come with adolescence lie behind how changes in their lives, such as moving, will affect them.

When you come to challenges in moving house with young people, it is important to take into account three things:

- the changes and challenges of adolescence and how they affect what your teenager is feeling and doing;
- what is happening in your family?—family relationships, family stresses, family strengths; and
- what is happening in your teenager's life?—school, friendships, activities, personal strengths and vulnerabilities.

Teenagers/adolescents/young people – who are they?

Adolescents are a bit like butterflies or moths emerging from the cocoons that have kept them safe during their formative stages. The emerging process is often painful, not necessarily beautiful to the observer, and inevitably does some damage to the cocoon. However, the result is worth waiting for—a strong, beautiful moth or butterfly. In a similar way, the child who enters adolescence enters a period of momentous change both physically and psychologically, often feels ungainly in the process, brings major changes to the family who nurtures him, and usually emerges into a strong, capable young adult.

Changes of adolescence

The changes young people go through are universal, although they are handled differently by different cultures; and even within families some young people and some parents have an easier passage than others.

Sexual maturation

The change that people are most aware of is the maturing of the child sexually. Children's sexual organs mature and hormones bring their sexuality to the fore of their lives. They are living in a new and very different body and with very different feelings and desires that can overwhelm them. They are able to fall in love and to suffer the pangs of love that is not returned, as well as the joy of their first romances.

However, there are other deep and significant changes occurring in the young person. During this time she must move from being a child, protected and nurtured but also more or less controlled, to becoming an independent adult in charge of her own destiny.

Independence

Young people eagerly grasp at the freedom they perceive will come with adulthood and at the same time fear the responsibilities and challenges of the future. They want freedom but they feel at a very deep level the loss of the nurture and protection and dependency of childhood. They say 'no' and push parents away, while at the same time desperately wanting the nurture they are rejecting. In some ways teenagers are like two-year-olds—with their huge surge towards independence and all the emotional turmoil that comes with such big changes. However, a 14-year-old having a tantrum or mood swing is much harder for parents to manage than a two-year-old!

Peer groups

In order to become independent as an adult, young people must feel able to belong to a group of their peers and, until they have established that they can do this, being accepted by the peer group seems all-important. It can seem to parents that friends are more important than parents and family. It seems like that for the young person, too, but underneath it is not, and the need for parents is still great, though less recognised.

Future pathways

Young people also need to work out where they 'fit' in the world—what will be their place, their values, their life's work. Here is where things are very different for today's teenagers from the experiences of their parents. Their parents, and especially grandparents, probably mostly grew up with a job or career in mind and a fairly well-trodden pathway to follow. School → leave school → get a job or go to university or TAFE and then get a job → get married and raise a family. The period between adolescence and having a job is becoming longer for most young people as schooling and study are extended. This can be particularly hard for young people who are not academically inclined, but also hard for able students who are unclear about where their future lies. At the same time, marriage is not offering a smooth and certain 'happy ever after' as fewer young people are marrying and more relationships break up. The basic needs of young people are the same—a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of achievement and a fulfilling pathway—but the society they live in makes it harder for them to meet all those needs.

So what does this mean for young people's behaviour? All young people are different but here are some of the common experiences of parents.

Difficulties with affection and closeness with parents

Many young people have difficulties in accepting affection from their parents even though they still need it. Hugs and kisses are sometimes no longer accepted. Parents can often manage a quick gentle touch in passing or other ways to show affection without confronting young people's sensitivities.

- Some young people maintain closeness by ensuring that parents are involved in fighting with them. They will continue arguments and challenge reasonable rules which keep parents involved.
- Boys often find closeness more difficult as they can be more isolated in their feelings and less able to enjoin parents in interaction.
- Where one teenager will dispute a rule and get into an angry argument, another will go off by himself or shut himself in his room, so making it harder for parents to reach him.
- Girls may be more negative with their mothers. Many young girls who have been especially close to their mothers during the childhood years need to establish their individuality by opposing and criticising them. Mothers can find this very hard to cope with, and it is only by keeping in mind the young people's very real need of their parents that they can weather the ups and downs of adolescence.

Need for privacy

Just when you hoped for your early parenting to develop into a friendship as your children grow up, you find yourself closed out by their need for privacy. Bedroom doors are shut and conversations hushed up. Allowing young people privacy is important and it helps to remember that eventually they will most likely become your friends on a different level. In between, they sometimes seem to need to go to extremes to establish their separateness.

Opposition

Adolescence can polarise families and prevent parents and young people listening to each other. It is usually up to the parent to make the first, second and third moves to a better relationship. Younger children tend to idealise their parents—'my dad knows more than your dad'—and to believe in their opinions. As they grow into adolescence they need to be able to develop their own values, positions and opinions in order to become thinking adults. While this is happening parents often find that their young people have opposite opinions from theirs about almost everything—what they eat, what they believe, what matters in the world. If this happens you can help your young person think through things by listening respectfully to his viewpoint and also telling him why you believe or do what you do. You might not always realise it, but your words do have an impact and, while they disagree with parents in discussion, many young people still support them outside the home.

If young people grew up still thinking their parents were perfect, it would be hard for them to feel they could be as capable an adult as their parents and this would be very discouraging. So they need to find out that you are not perfect—not too difficult, since none of us is—and then they can go forward feeling OK about themselves as young adults.

Still wanting to be a child

Teenagers want to grow up, to behave in grown-up ways and to have grown-up responsibilities. They also want to hang on to the safety and nurture of being young children. The place where they can best express their needs to still be a child is at home. This is where they know they are accepted and if they behave badly they may be censured but they will not be rejected. So you might find that your teenager sometimes seems like a 'house devil and street angel'. It will help to deal with tantrums and 'I won'ts' if you remember that it is part of the great struggle of two opposing forces—to stay young and to grow up—and, although they will never admit it, childhood is a hard thing to leave behind, while adulthood is an exciting but scary goal.

Another way some young people express their needs is by breaking rules and inciting arguments which keep their parents involved even though it seems that the children want to be left to go their own way.

Sensitivity to criticism—even helpful hints

Because adolescents are adjusting to major changes in their appearance and their lives, and because being accepted by their peers is so important to them, they are very sensitive to criticism. Self-esteem is largely related to feeling popular, especially for girls. Even a mention of a skin spot for which you know a very good cure, or an outfit that is inappropriate for the weather, will bring a cold shoulder at best and often an outright fight. Tread carefully because their self-esteem can be very fragile and they need your support to help them face the world.

Needing to be accepted by the group

This is one of the very important ways that young people learn to cope in the world. They need to feel that they fit into a group of friends who like them, and will go to great lengths to conform with the group looks and behaviour. Often parents will object, sometimes because of cost, when their teenager wants to buy some article of clothing that 'everyone else is wearing'. Sometimes we forget that we, too, like to conform—although not going to the extent of the young. Trends in fashion, house decoration, etc. affect the majority of adults, but adults have learned where they fit in the world so are less likely to be greatly concerned at being different from their group. Not so, with teens. Parents need to understand the need to be the same as their mates, even if you can't always support a particular want (or need). This includes deciding what you can accept because it is important for your child and where you must intervene because of cost or safety etc.

For example, could you accept:

- a very 'outlandish' hair style;
- rings in strange places;
- group clothing choice of torn jeans in all circumstances; or
- smelly sandshoes for all events?

When you are thinking about your teenager's behaviour ask yourself, if reasonable care is taken, is it likely to harm your teen in the long run? Is it something you can accept as part of their developing individualism? Or is it something that might have long-term negative effects? And remember there are sometimes two sides to this. One 17-year-old girl would not walk down the street with her mother because her mother would sing as she walked. Another younger girl walked well behind her father (who was in an important management position) in case she met any friends and they saw his hairstyle.

The problem of trust

'You don't trust me' often becomes part of the dialogue between parents and young people. Trust is worth thinking about. Growing in independence requires parents to trust that their young people will be OK, will make sensible decisions and will be safe. However, being young and learning is the time when all decisions will not be sensible, and sometimes young people make choices that are not safe. As parents you are responsible as far as you can be for your young people's safety and wellbeing. You cannot actually restrain a young person physically from doing something but you do have more of a psychological power than you may think. All the years of good grounding through childhood, your love and commitment mean that, even when she is saying: 'I will go whatever you say', your rules and your advice and wisdom are very present in her head. If your teenager breaks a rule, think about whether it is the right rule; rules do need to be changed as young people become more independent. If it is a rule about something like safety or contributing to their share of chores, then don't give up even if it is broken. State it clearly again. 'I don't want you to go to that place again. I believe you will try to stay safe but it isn't a safe place and you may not be able to.' If you give up because your young person has broken a rule, he will be much less safe.

Trust needs to be given according to ability and should be earned by being respected. You don't have to trust someone who breaks your trust. However, remember that teenagers are learners and mistakes will be made, and then you need to give them another chance to do better.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is important to help teenagers develop the strength to cope with all the ups and downs they will meet. Self-esteem is about believing in yourself. Teenagers have many moments of self-doubt and need your support to maintain their self-esteem.

There are some things we know are important to self-esteem:

I can. Knowing that you are a capable person.

You can help by:

- encouraging your child's interests and skills;
- giving opportunities to learn to be good at things he values;
- reminding him of the skills and talents he has used in the past to overcome difficult situations; and
- giving appropriate praise for things well done, not indiscriminate praise that doesn't have meaning.

I am. Feeling loved and lovable.

You can help by:

- telling your teenager you love her and showing that you love her by doing little special things that help her and spending time with her;
- not saying that you love her 'in spite of her bad behaviour'—this says that she is loved but not that she is lovable;
- assisting her in the things she wants to do to feel good about herself (within reason); and
- appreciating the qualities you love about her.

I have. Knowing where you fit in the world and that there is a network of people who care for you.

You can help by:

- supporting friendship networks with other teens, helping your teenager if she has problems with this, especially in a new place;
- keeping your teenager in touch with the wider family network, even if you are apart;
- telling your teenager about family history and family stories; and
- keeping up family rituals and special events (teenagers don't always want to go to family events but they do get support from being part of the wider family network).

Tips for parenting teens

Growing up is not easy and there is no magical way to turn your child into a responsible young adult without the ups and downs of adolescence. Some young people weather these times better than others, and the years of caring parenting that you have put in provide a good basis for your young person to build on. There is nothing that really predicts how any individual young person will adapt and cope with the changes in these years. Here are some thoughts from the wisdom of many parents who have survived the teen years and come out with happy, healthy young adults at the end:

1. **Negotiate rules.** As young people grow older they need to have more input to rules and as they move on in responsibility, be ready to moderate limits.

2. **Say sorry.** Teenagers can push your buttons and you may react in ways you did not want to. Saying sorry is the best way to teach teens to say sorry.

3. **Accept them for who they are.** This may mean giving up some dreams, but they will be replaced by different satisfactions in time.

4. **Be a good listener.** However much good advice you have to give, the best advice is to listen before you give any.

5. **Take an interest in their interests.** Take time to listen to their music, watch their sport and encourage their activities. Take time for friendship.

6. **Don't give in to pressure.** Of course we all do sometimes, but, if you do it most of the time, it teaches your child that this is what will happen. However, if you know what you said was wrong, admit it and change—this is good teaching.

7. **Keep noticing the good.** Tell them you love them, notice the things they do well and when they look good. Even if they deny it or brush it off they will hear you.

8. **Back each other up.** If there are two parents in the family it is important that they back each other up. It doesn't help teens to know that their parents are not together. If you have differences, try to sort them out away from the young people.

9. **If things get too tough, ask for help.** There are times in everyone's lives when we need some help from outside.

10. **Hang in there.** No matter what happens, your young people need to know you are there, caring, trying, making mistakes, helping them pick up after their mistakes and loving them.

Letting go

The hard challenge for parents of teens is letting go. When they were children you could control all they did and make sure they were safe and healthy and had acceptable behaviour. And you have a huge investment in time, energy and love in caring for them. All parents also have some dreams they expect their children to fulfil. It used to be marriage and 'happy ever after' for girls and a good, steady, lifetime job for boys. Most parents want their children to be happy in their relationships and successful in their careers, whatever these should be. But you cannot ensure that this will happen, and along the way some of your dreams will probably be shattered. Your young people need to know that you accept them as they are. You may not agree with everything they do, but that you love and accept the person they are, not necessarily the same as the one you hoped they would be.

In doing this you need to also relinquish some of the time and energy you have invested in your children, because this helps to free them to move on. Think about what will fill the gap and be important to you when they move on, and work towards new dreams for yourself. Your children will always be important but will be closer to you if they can see that they are free to be themselves and you have other things in your life as well.

It is never too late to start new things – to study (you will be five years older in five years whether or not you have got the qualification you are thinking of, so why not have it?); get a job; get a new job; take up something that has always interested you, and so on.

Sometimes this can put pressure on the parents' own relationship as it demands new ways of relating to each other and managing time and responsibilities. For example, a mother who has spent most of her emotional and physical energy rearing children may want to put more into the relationship with her partner at this time or make new demands on their relationship. Or she may decide to start a career which needs different kinds of adjustments. Or a father may be feeling that it is time to put some more energy into parenting at this time of his life, just when the young people are moving into their own lives and wanting to 'do their own thing'. All these things can be managed, but to manage them you need to be flexible and adaptable. If you have a career where flexibility and adaptability are not as important as orderliness and order, you might find it hard to adapt to the changes of adolescence and need to make a conscious effort.

When to be concerned about your teenager

Young people have lots of tough times, the worst often being the break-up of a romance or a family break-up. All teenagers have mood swings because of life changes and hormonal changes. However, sometimes things get too much for them and their health is at risk. If any of the following are happening to your teenager it is worth at least talking it over with a professional counsellor.

- Loss of interest in friends or usual activities.
- Major changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Aggression that is damaging to themselves or others. Sometimes aggression is a cover-up for depression.
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs.
- Marked change in school performance.
- Avoiding school, stealing, vandalism.
- Great fear of becoming obese when there are no physical signs of being overweight.
- Constant worrying.
- Hearing or seeing things that are not there.
- Depression, unhappiness and being irritable, poor appetite, sleeping difficulties, thinking about death.
- Frequent outbursts of anger.

If things are getting worse and what you are doing is not working, ask for help. Parents who ask for help sooner rather than later have the most chance of getting through the hard times quickly. Don't think it is 'just being a teenager' and let it go. When teenagers act out it is because of a problem—for example it could be grief or anger or even depression.

Some facts about change

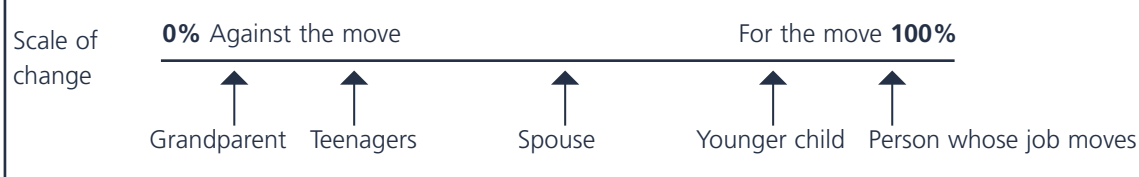
When thinking about a change such as moving house it might help to consider where everyone is on the scale of wanting the change and then consider each person's needs. The scale below is an example of a moving scale of a family. You can see that the grandparent was almost totally against the move, while the father who had employment in the new place was the most excited, followed by a younger child who thought it was an adventure. The spouse who had to leave a good job to meet her partner's needs was not so keen. The teenagers were back with the grandparent. If you have a look at your family's moving scale you will see where you need to put in effort and energy to make the move successful.

Change is something everyone has to cope with from the moment of birth. For a new baby everything is new; the whole world is a change. As children grow they have more and more experiences on which to base coping with change. So what parents are teaching children from early childhood is helping them to learn ways to cope with changes. In a rapidly changing world, many experts have looked at what helps people to make the most of changes. Below are some of the things considered important in managing change.

All change involves some loss as well as some new opportunities. Expect that different family members will experience different losses and each will experience their loss in their own way. The losses that come with important changes cause grief, in the same way that the loss of a person or treasured object does. Young people, parents and children need to have opportunities to talk about their grief as well as to think about the opportunities. Grief can mean sadness, even depression, as well as sometimes anger, blaming, feeling helpless and not being able to use the person's usual life skills. Coping with loss takes time and it is important not to expect too much too soon.

- **Take everyone's needs into account** when you are planning the change. Consider the impact of the change on the whole family.
- **Involve everyone**, as they are able, in planning and implementing the change.
- **Be flexible**. Think about how you can adapt plans to take everyone's needs into account.
- **Build on strengths**. Ask family members what has helped them to cope with previous changes and try to use these strengths.
- **Talk about hopes and fears**. There are always fears about new ventures. Avoiding talking about them won't make them go away and is more likely to make them grow. Make space for everyone in the family to talk about hopes and fears. Take young people's (and everyone's) fears seriously and make arrangements where possible to help them feel more secure. Just saying 'You'll be OK' is not enough, even if you truly believe it.

Example of a moving scale



- **Having some control helps** people to deal with change. Work out what things your young people can reasonably have some control over and allow them some 'say'. These might (or might not) include input to choice of school, of where you live, of their room, of their room décor, what to take, how to organise the move, how to organise farewells, and how to meet with the new school.

- **Having support helps** to manage difficult times, including change. This applies to parents, too. If there is no particular person in the family who can be a support, there may be someone outside the family to provide support. This could be a special relative, an old friend or a new friend or, if necessary, a professional counsellor. Often young people can turn to a friend's mother or a sporting coach when they can't or won't talk about their feelings at home.

- **Take time out**. Don't expect everything to go like clockwork, because it won't. If things get tough, take a break.

- To manage change well you need to **believe in yourself**, to believe that you can adapt, to believe that you will make it. Young people need to know that you believe this about them and they need to see that you believe in yourself.

Parents and change – teenagers' views

'If your parents are happy, you are happy.'

How young people manage change is very dependent on how their parents manage it. Relationships are the key and children are learning all the time from their parents' relationships with each other as well as with them. The things they are learning will affect the way they make relationships as young adults.

'My mother always is left with the packing when Dad's gone, and she always is angry.'

When the change happens as a result of one parent's work, and the other parent has little control over what is happening, it can seem to young people that one parent and his or her work is more valuable than the other. If the other parent's needs are not heard and taken into account, she or he may become angry or become a martyr and model these kinds of behaviours to the children. For example, it may seem that the partner whose job causes the change is happily incorporated into the new work situation while the other partner has given up employment, moved to the new situation, and is left to manage most of the move, especially the impact on the family.

Nowadays, in most families, both parents work outside the home by the time the children are teenagers. In discussing the move, young people need to see that the needs of both are being heard, considered and addressed. A mother's anxiety or anger or fears about the change can impact negatively on the children. It is no longer OK to say 'You knew what the job was when you married me' or 'I am doing this job for you' as a way to avoid meeting everyone's needs as well as possible. Young people need to see their parents considering each other, really understanding the other's situation, and making an effort to see that the other's needs are being met. If the 'at home' parent is the mother, she needs to show that she is also taking care of her own needs, not just being a helper for everyone else. This is especially helpful for the self-esteem of young girls and is good modelling for boys' expectations of future partnerships. If the parent who is not being transferred, whether mother or father, is positive and forward-looking it will make the changes much easier on everyone. The responsibility for this rests with both parents.

One thing that is clear is that, if parents are together in what they are thinking and saying, supportive of each other and positive about the move, their young people will cope better.

Moving house with young people

Moving house with young people involves two transitions—life transition (adolescence) and the move. When planning moving house with young people it is important to take into account the issues that come about just from being a teenager (see **Changes of adolescence**), as well as those related to the move. Changes such as moving house come on top of these normal changes, which is why moving can be more difficult for teenagers. Young people are less likely to feel good about themselves if they have a number of changes at once, and this is what moving house often brings—change of where you live, leaving old friends, making new friends, change of school and so on. All of this can lead to anxiety, stress and sometimes depression. However, this does not have to happen. There is much you can do to help your young people to learn, enjoy and benefit from the changes, as well as help them with the hard things.

The rest of this book is about issues particular to travelling with teens, and much of it comes from the wisdom of parents and young people from around Australia who have moved house, sometimes many times. Some have enjoyed the moves, some have hated it, most have a balance of enjoying some parts and hating others—and all have added something to the knowledge about how to make the most of it. What matters is that young people's needs are recognised and taken into account in all aspects of decision-making. Even within the family everyone has different abilities and needs. What has worked for one child won't necessarily work with the next one. Parents must be adaptable and flexible to respond to each child as an individual. Young people who have already moved many times may have developed skills, confidence and strengths they can bring to the next move, or may have lost confidence and need more support. It is usually easier if they know what to expect and have had some practice at making new friends.

Young people, like the rest of us, vary in the way they cope with changes such as moving house. The responses from the young people I interviewed were just as varied as people are:

'I hated it the first few times and nothing and no-one can make me go through it all again.'

'I've never found it overly stressful, rather exciting.'

'I love moving.'

'I'm an honest-to-God chatterbox and I'll talk to anyone, so I make friends easily.'

'It's a great experience.'

'It's cool if my dad has to leave, it's his job to defend Australia's shores.'

'Moving is not the end of the world, you will get through it.'

When you are talking with your young people about the move, you can remind them of the times they have moved before and get them to think about the personal skills and resources they used then and can build on now.

What the survey said

In a survey to find out how moving affected young people, I asked them to answer a number of questions. They were not required to put their names on their papers. 51 boys and 83 girls from different schools across Australia completed the questionnaire. Here are the main results of the survey.

Coping with the move

The majority of students, 69 per cent of boys and 86 per cent of girls, said they adjusted to moving well or very well. However, this leaves a very significant minority of young people who really struggled to adjust to the move. About 70 per cent of both boys and girls said that they were able to

cope with the changes well or very well, leaving about 30 per cent who said they did not cope well, and five students (all girls) who said they could not cope at all.

Making friends

80 per cent of girls and 59 per cent of the boys said they were able to make new friends well or very well; 29 per cent of boys and 20 per cent of girls said they were not easily able to make new friends.

Family stress

67 per cent of girls and 51 per cent of boys said moving was stressful or very stressful for their families; 65 per cent of girls and 49 per cent of boys said it put strains on their relationship with their mother, while 48 per cent of girls and 38 per cent of boys said it negatively affected their relationship with their fathers. A number of the students noted that their fathers were not there and it was their mothers who had to deal with the day-to-day stresses of moving.

School work

Seventy nine per cent of girls and 69 per cent of boys said moving affected their schoolwork a bit or a lot.

So the young people are saying that, although most of them manage moving OK, some well, for many young people it is quite stressful, for some very stressful indeed, and we need to take notice of their concerns.

Overall the results of the survey show that in most areas most young people adjust well or very well to moving but that there are a significant number of young people who need extra help and support. It is clear that moving is stressful for families, especially the 'at home' parent—usually the mother. The information in the survey supports the need for parents to be aware of the challenges that moving places on young people.

In the area of education, the majority of young people felt that the move had negatively affected their schoolwork. Not doing well at school affects not only exam results but also friendships, self-esteem and family relationships, so it is important to give as much support as possible to help young people who have to change schools.

The final question on the survey asked for any other comments. One boy wrote '*No thanks, I got it off my chest.*' The fact that the opportunity to express feelings, even in a survey, is helpful to 'get things off your chest' shows how important the opportunities to share feelings are and to have them understood and accepted.

What the teenagers say

'I love moving but I hate it.'

I interviewed more than 150 young people from around Australia, and naturally there were very widely differing viewpoints and experiences. Most of the young people had mixed feelings about moving, usually including 'confident', 'scared', 'excited', 'resentful', 'angry' or 'sad'. However, a few things stand out that most young people agree on.

What is good

'It makes us closer every time we move because we stay in the car together and talk about feelings and stuff.'

- A different environment, being able to visit lots of places.
- New home—decorating a new room.
- Making new friends.
- Having friends in different places.
- Lots of new experiences.
- A fresh start. A clean slate.
- Sometimes moving to a better place, like by the beach.

What is hard

'When you're little and you have to move you have to change handwriting but now, when you're a teenager, you have to change friends. It's so hard.'

- Leaving friends.
- Making new friends.
- Missing family.
- Catching up with work in a new school.
- Being put back a year because they can't find the same level school work.
- Arguments in the family.
- Having to pack up—again!
- Not seeing my dad.
- Losing pets.
- Losing boyfriends.
- Having belongings broken or lost in the move.

What helps

'My Mum's great and really understanding. She listens to me and what I have to say.'

- Having choices, helping make decisions.
- Having parents listen to problems in adapting.
- Being able to bring pets.
- Friends.
- Parents telling us all the good things that are going to happen.
- Knowing that you have support from family.
- Having your friends promise to write.

Many young people said it would be very helpful if the education system was the same in all states.

Some things for parents to think about

'Parents could tell me why it is important that we move.'

Sometimes parents assume that their children, especially teenagers, fully understand why the move has to happen but often they have only heard bits and pieces and may come to wrong conclusions. Understanding reasons may not change things but it can help with acceptance. It is worth checking how your teenagers see the reason for the move, and then explaining why it is important, even if you think they should know and understand.

'Time changes and people move on, regardless if you're there or not. You have to focus on the future not the past.'

It can be helpful in the period after the move for young people to keep in close contact with old friends while they find their feet in the new place. However, over time, people and friendships usually change, especially at such a dynamic time of life as adolescence. If friends are apart they have different and unshared experiences and can be disappointed if they expect to take up where they left off. So helping them to focus on the future will help them to gradually let go of the need to hang on to the past. Some friendships last over time and distance but it is helpful to have broader interests rather than to depend on them.

'It's really hard to leave your family behind when you've visited them every weekend, all your life.'

Extended family networks help to protect children and young people from feeling distressed and from getting into trouble. Teenagers often act as if they don't want to be part of all the boring extended family activities, but the fact that they are part of this family is important. This does not mean that they should be forced to attend every event, but it will help if you can make it possible for them to keep in contact with the people who support them and keep them feeling part of the wider family—even at a distance. Although most of the young

people in the survey said their main support was from their parents (usually mother), several said the people they found it easiest to talk to about any problems were their uncles or grandparents.

'When my father leaves it is excruciating.'

A number of the teenagers commented that their fathers were very supportive and understanding but often not there. Having a parent away not only means the teenager misses his/her support but also puts pressure in terms of extra responsibility and tasks on the remaining parent. If the parent who is most away makes an effort to keep in touch and be a listener, it clearly helps the family.

On the other side, some of the teenagers said that their fathers are away often, and when they come home *'it's annoying when they take over'.* Fathers who come home from a busy and responsible job sometimes carry the 'boss' role into the home. This can cause problems in the family, especially with teenagers. While younger children are more likely to accept being 'given orders', teenagers are much more likely to rebel, causing major confrontations which are hard to resolve. Leaving the work role at work and coming home as a parent, with parental authority, but also respecting young people's growing need for independence, works best in most families and also respects the other parent's role in managing in your absence.

'I shut myself away from the world.'

While most young people in the survey said they turned to their mothers or friends when they needed help, quite a few said they tried to deal with things on their own. If your teenager doesn't talk to you or seem to have friends to talk to, it can make it harder for him to cope with feelings and problems. Making it easier for him to talk to you is a way to start (see **Talking about feelings**). If this doesn't help, think about who in your family or friends he finds it easier to talk to and try to provide some opportunities for this, without pressuring or questioning, which make teenagers more withdrawn and less likely to talk.

Preparing for the move

Young people will value having lots of warning about a move, where possible. This gives them a chance to think about it, to talk about it with their friends, and to be involved in the planning. You might need to arrange visiting times, for instance, so your teenagers don't miss out on end-of-year school or other celebrations. The end of the year is when many good things happen at school, and being part of these celebrations can help young people cope with the 'ending' of one part of their life before beginning another.

For young people who are at school see **About education**. If your young people are working, you could help or encourage them to use the Internet or a visit to find out about jobs in the new area. Starting in a job is a good way to settle in, so finding work early is worthwhile. It is harder for young people to get work if they do not have experience or references so gather together what references you can to take with you. This is helpful for teenagers with part-time jobs as well.

Do lots of research on the area you are moving to. Take a tour of what is offering for young people in the new town. Use the Internet. Involve your young people in research and planning.

Some young people don't want to tell their friends that they are going straight away as they are afraid that their friends will withdraw from them. They may ask parents not to tell their friends. Other young people believe it is better to tell friends straight away and then make the remaining time together special. It might help to talk over with them how they tell their friends, and ways to help the friends include others so they won't be stranded when you move.

One of the things young people told me they hate is the packing up and unpacking. It is especially hard to organise this aspect of the move if one parent is away and not available to help. Try to plan ahead so your teenagers can have some breaks, kick a football, or go for a walk or down the street for a coffee or milkshake. It might take a bit longer to get unpacked but, as long as the things you most need are done first, this is worth trying. Sometimes it is possible to take a holiday en route to the new place so that the trip itself can be fun.

Sometimes families get into fights at the planning stage of moving, especially if one parent wants to move more than the other. Teenagers may rebel, hoping that they might prevent the move. This can happen even when they have been told clearly that the move has to happen. Teenagers are not always realistic, and think their wishing can change things (although some who have rebelled in this way told me that they really wouldn't want their parents to change the moving plans because of their behaviour). Good communication and strategies that value everyone's contribution are really important to prevent this. Think about where everyone is on the scale of wanting the move and try to meet differing needs as well as you can.

About education

One of the biggest difficulties for young people moving is the effect it can have on their education. Although in Australia there are moves towards a common curriculum between states, it is not happening yet.

One of the main things that will help young people academically is a home atmosphere which encourages learning and achievement, without pushing it. If you have books around the home and you show that you value knowledge and achievement, this will provide a positive atmosphere. You can also help by making a place where your young people can study without interruptions. Some young people study better in quietness; others like to have music on. Be available to assist and support with homework, not just police it. Young people who do well often say they have had interest, encouragement and, when needed, assistance from one or other parent.

'I stress or panic when I get lost at school when I first start.'

This is very real for young people. There are some things you can do to help. Rowan's story is a good example of this. Rowan's school was exceptionally tuned in to helping students over difficult times. If there is a choice of schools, look for one with a good understanding of this. If you are not living in the area, some of the suggestions in Rowan's story will be hard for you, but many would be able to be adapted.

Rowan's story (by his mother)

In the year prior to starting secondary college, the transition teacher from his new school visited every primary school at least three times. Each time, Rowan came home with a bit more information – so they didn't just bombard the children with information and expect them to remember it in one day, but seemed to work on building a relationship with the children and built connections through the teacher to the new school. In essence, the transition teacher became like an adult version of a 'transition object'. This was evident when Rowan came home and said that they were going to practice going to their new school in December, and that their transition teacher would be standing at the bus stop at the school waving them in – a very powerful image for 12-year-olds, and incredibly reassuring for not just the children/students, but their parents. In order to build up to this moment, the families were invited into the school to hear from older pupils and parents, while Rowan went and met his form class and form teacher (they played games and got to know their space, each other, and their form teacher). Rowan was escorted to the form room by other students from the school, while the parents went into the hall. So by the time Rowan caught the bus for his practice run to the school, he already knew the transition teacher and knew she would be waiting at the school right where the bus stopped, he already knew his form teacher, the children in his form class, and knew exactly where it was in the school. How impressive is that!! On this practice day of going to school, we asked Rowan to find the names of two possible friends – indicating that he didn't have to 'make friends with them' but be on the lookout for potential people that looked and sounded like possible friends. We asked him to write down their names. When he came home that day the first thing he said to me was I have made three friends! He was absolutely thrilled!! So all over the summer break, he had the image of three new friends that he could meet on his first day of school in 2005. He was not anxious at all about going to high school. We can't fault the school's transition policy and practice. We were absolutely delighted with the careful planning – we later learnt that the school had organised itself into sub-schools, with the new students having most of their classes in their form room, with the teachers going to them! Only specialist classes such as technology and sport, requires them to move about the school. Similarly, the Year 12s are located right next door to the Year Sevens – no bullies in sight, and the teachers' offices are also interspersed around the classrooms! So lots and lots of supervision.

The school is called Dromana Secondary College – and it is to their credit that Rowan has had such a wonderful introduction to secondary school. He has finally returned to being that 'lovely, happy person, wanting to engage with the world' we knew when we were in Canberra.

After this comes choosing a school. You might not have much choice but, where you do, you can find out all you can about suitable schools—take your teenager with you if possible, ask other parents, and include your young people in the decision-making.

You need to inquire well in advance about subjects and choices available at the different schools in your new neighbourhood. It is important that the school suits the young person's interests and abilities—some schools may have better sporting teams, music, academic subjects, art, etc. One way to start is to check out school websites.

Let the school know early about your teenager's interests and skills. Often plans are made the previous year about subjects, electives, etc.

It is usually easier, if possible, for new students to start at the beginning of the school year before everything is settled and friendships made. However, for older students who are starting final years of schooling, check with the school. Some schools start final year examination studies in the last term of the year before.

Some things you could inquire about that might make the transition to a new school easier:

- What sort of program does the school have to integrate new students?
- Does the school have a buddy system or something similar to help introduce the new student to the school?
- Are there many 'travelling teens' in the school? Schools which have large numbers of young people whose parents move may have more opportunities and programs that suit your children.
- If there is a choice of which year level to go into, often being one of the older ones in the class is a help.
- If there is a middle school, it can make the transition easier for younger teenagers.
- Ask about pastoral care in the school.
- Is there a fairly even balance of sexes in the classroom? It is often harder for girls to break into groups because of the importance of friendship groups to girls, so they need to be in a class where there are enough girls for them to have some options.
- ADF children often find it easier in schools where there are other military children—easier friendships, more teacher understanding. (If you are in an ADF family your local Regional Education Liaison Officer [REDLO] can help with the transition.)
- Does the school have a special teacher or transition aide to help young people who have moved with any problems? Ask how they cope with gaps and overlaps in previous learning.
- If your teenager has a portfolio showing what he has done at previous schools, ask what to do with it and how it will be used.
- Ask whether it is possible for students to go into a class with someone they already know, if there is someone.
- Some schools have award cards which give privileges if the student earns enough points. If the new school has a similar system, ask if there is any way the points from the old school can be transferred.
- A small school is sometimes easier, depending on what is offered, but there may not be many choices of friends.
- Ask about student customs at the school—what they wear, any particular ways of doing things that will be helpful and save embarrassment for someone new. Young people need to learn what the local 'crazes' are and what the current slang is.

Some young people make friends with teachers easily and get the support they need. Some try too hard and get rejected. If your young person is one who is anxious or tries too hard, talk to the teacher about it. These young people need a response that is predictable and that they can count on. It helps if the teacher thinks about what is reasonable assistance that he or she can go on giving and sets this in place from the start so there is not a rejection or disappointment later on.

Finding the way around

'You don't know where the classrooms are.'

Things that seem simple, such as finding classrooms, can be stressful for new students, especially if the school doesn't have someone to orient newcomers. You could ask the principal to get someone to take you around the school while your teenager is with you. That way he gets to find his own way around without having to ask for help on the first day.

Troubleshooting

'These children need more support.'—a teacher.

Some young people give up trying at school because of the bits they have missed from previous school changes. They feel as if they are always behind, so they give up trying. Then they can get into a cycle of feeling helpless, blaming others, and not giving themselves the best chance. Others define themselves as the class clown to get attention and cover up for what they are not able to do. Again this doesn't give them the opportunity to try to catch up on what they have missed.

Here are some examples of things that can happen:

'I don't know all my times tables, I missed some of that.'

'I did Italian, now I have to do Japanese.'

- Encourage your teenagers to tell you about difficulties. It sometimes helps if you talk about troubles you might have had at school. You might not be able to supply an Italian teacher (although you might find one if it really matters) but you can try to help with tables. Young people often don't like to admit what they don't know in class so they don't ask—*'It looks like you're retarded if you ask for help.'* So the gaps in their education, especially mathematics, keep on compounding. In some schools teachers ask about gaps in the work and proactively help students to catch up. In others, with large classes, this doesn't happen, even when the student brings a portfolio of previous work covered. One student said that he told the teacher: *'You're teaching fractions that I can't understand.'* When something they have not done before comes up, it is helpful if students tell the teacher. Not every young person has the courage or confidence to do this. Some may need parents' help, so try to know where your teenager is having problems, and make sure that the teacher knows.

- Special coaching may be available after a move, and this is a good opportunity to help cover gaps, although some teenagers need encouragement to accept it.

- Remind your young people of what they are good at. Give them opportunities to do what they can succeed at. It is very depressing to always be practising what you have to struggle with.

- Take an interest and ask the school for help without embarrassing your teenager. Your interest and presence at school will have a positive influence, so long as you are working with the school, not against it. Even if you have some criticisms of the school, it is important for your children's education that you work together as long as they are at that school. Otherwise young people tend to blame the school for problems and abandon their own efforts.

- Young people need to know you are supporting their education and wellbeing. Teachers, students and school counsellors all say that young people do better if their mothers are helping them.
- Schools clearly have a major role in helping young people to cope with moving, and, if things don't go well at school, this is a major cause of stress.

Rituals

Rituals are ways we deal with the big things in our lives. They are special things we do, both as a society (e.g. weddings) and also as individuals and families (e.g. the way we celebrate Christmas). Rituals help make things predictable and give a sense of belonging and continuity when other things around are changing. They help with the anxieties that big changes can bring, and moving house is one of these. Your family may have developed its own special things to do with moving, but here are some suggestions that other families have used:

- Developing a life story book for each child in which they write and paste special things to do with their life events, including moving. These can include writing about feelings, short stories about each move, a picture of each house when you arrive and when you leave, photos and notes from special friends, etc.
- Having a special farewell party for young people and their friends. Take lots of photos.
- A special treat when arriving at the new place. Maybe a tour of the town and then a meal somewhere the young people enjoy.
- A plain coloured T-shirt or sweater that friends can all write their names on.
- Keeping a memento from each place, maybe the same kind of thing in each place.

Finding your feet in a new place

'Be supportive but not put pressure on me to adjust immediately.'

There is much you can do to help your young people find their feet in the new place, and it is worth the time and energy involved.

You can show them how to cope by what you do for yourself to find your own feet. They need to see that you are OK, that you are getting on with your life. They have many of the same problems you do: finding friends, finding your place in the new environment, finding your way around, settling in. What you do is modelling for them. You need to make the effort so that they will too. They need to be involved in the community as soon as possible.

You can:

- help them to look around for places where there are young people, e.g. a skate park;
- find youth centres and drop-in centres;
- offer to be the coach/driver/scorer for a sporting team your young person wants to join;
- find out about local activities young people can be involved in, such as drama, art and music; and
- be available to drive them to activities and groups if necessary.

Moving disrupts family routines and ways of doing things, so new ways that suit the new situation should be worked out as soon as possible.

About relationships

'It's hard getting friends but I get over it.'

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of friendships to young people. Anything that parents can do to foster connections, both old and new, will enrich their young people's lives and experience of the move. Leaving old friends and making new friends were identified by the young people as one of the hardest aspects of moving.

Making new friends

'Everything takes time. You can't throw yourself at a group of people and say "like me".'

One of the most important needs for young people who move is to be able to make new friends. If they are lucky they will already know someone in the area. Having at least one contact leads to others and makes the whole process easier. Having brothers and sisters can help because they can 'hang around together'. If it is a totally new area, perhaps the parents know a family with teenagers so that the young people can meet informally. This makes starting at a new school much easier. You could ask at work if anyone has teenagers and then arrange to meet in a way that seems perfectly natural and does not look contrived, for example a weekend barbecue.

Sometimes being part of a family who moves can make it harder to make friends. One mother was told that a child was not allowed to become friends with her own child because her family might move and the child left behind might be hurt. Some students say that others shut them out because they know they will move on and they will have to find new friends. However, fortunately these are in the minority. If this does happen to your teenagers, you will know that there are many others willing to enjoy new friendships and include newcomers in their group.

Young people say it is good to have a mix of friends—some who may move on and some who belong in the town. Sometimes the 'travelling' teens make up their own group and support each other, but being part of the local scene as well has advantages.

For ADF young people there is sometimes an opportunity for peers to tour the base and be introduced to interesting and exciting equipment. This helps give status to young people who are new to the school or area. Usually any help given by adults has to be very subtle. Teenagers generally don't want parents' help in making friendships. You could do something like have a barbecue for a few families in the new area, but not anything more direct to link the young people.

Young people who have the ability to take the initiative find it easier to make new friends. It is important to be friendly. If your teenager finds it hard, you could suggest just smiling and saying something like 'Hi, I'm ... ' Others find they can manage by waiting until someone comes up to them and makes the first move.

Most young people prefer to wait a while before becoming too involved with the first people they meet so they can be sure these are the ones they want for their friends. This means that they need to have the confidence to be alone some of the time at first.

When one 13-year-old moved from Darwin to a southern city he stood up in class on the first day at school and said, 'My name is Sean and I have just come from Darwin. Is there anyone here who lives near me?' There was another boy who did live nearby and they have been friends ever since. Not every young person would be able to do this, but if they can, encourage them to have a try at reaching out to other young people.

Being able to talk about their feelings and problems is most important. Even doing the focus groups helped some of the young people because they met others in the same situation and were able to make contacts. One girl wrote: *'Thank you for coming to our school. Talking with others has helped.'*

Getting into the right group

When young people come to a new school they need to feel part of a group and sometimes this leads them to choose the first group which makes it easy for them to join, not necessarily a group that will be best for them.

Teenagers who have shifted often suggest being friendly to everyone, but waiting before committing to a particular group until they find a group with similar interests to their own. Teenagers say it is better for them to be in a 'middle' group – not the most social or academic, nor the ones on the fringe who are testing limits. *'Middle groups just accept you—they do fun things but they aren't idiots.'*

However, waiting is hard and some teenagers get into a 'fringe' or problem group because that is the only place they can find to be. This can prevent them from settling and having a good start.

Teenage girls can be very judgemental, and to be a member of a group often means having to wear the same make-up and clothes. It is hard to be really individual and be accepted into the group if you are a teenager. That comes later when young people have more maturity and confidence.

So whatever you can do as parents to help them as they are finding their feet will be worthwhile. This can include driving them to sporting or social events, assisting when asked with driving friends, helping behind the scenes, helping them to find the right clothes, etc.

Disability and difference

'Because I'm not the most pretty or skinny person it's not as easy for me as people who are more popular.'

Young people with a disability or who are different in some way can find moving even more difficult. It takes longer for others to get to know them as individuals. They need more help in meeting friends and more personal support while they adjust to the new situation. This means they may be more likely to show stress through anger or sadness, and need you to understand what is behind this.

Sometimes it helps to open the way if the young person, with the teacher's permission, talks to the class about her disability, about what it means and how she copes, but also about the things she enjoys so that the other students see her as a person as well.

While parents hope that a new school will mean a new start for young people who have had some problems in the past, this is unlikely to happen. Even in the new environment they are likely get into the same kind of group and situations as before. Young people, like the rest of us, tend to carry their problems with them, and whatever is causing the problem usually needs to be tackled. Getting help from a school counsellor or a youth counsellor is a good way to start a new situation.

All the things parents do to help other children also need to be done for young people with disabilities.

Keeping connections with old friends

'You don't get over the loss, really—just accept it and try to keep close friendships going.'

Leaving friends often has an even greater impact than having to make new friends. However, it is possible with modern technology for young people to keep closely in touch with old friends, and this can help them in managing the transition.

Mobile phones are very popular, and if your children use a pre-paid card you will not suddenly find you have an immense bill to pay. SMS messages are cheap to send, and young people enjoy using these. If you have a computer at home, emails are a quick and easy way to keep in touch and send photographs, etc. If you are very high tech, you can use Web Cam, which means the young people can see each other as they talk.

In the first days after moving, young people need to keep closely in touch. They might want to make frequent trips back to visit old friends. Friendships often last through separations, and young people who move can take up old friendships easily and happily when they meet again. Gradually, as they make new friends and travel in new directions, the need for closeness will diminish and the friendship will change. '*Sometimes I feel I don't fit in because we've done different things—there are stories they don't know.*' Some young people said that a trip back after six months or so at a time when fares are cheap provides closure and helps them to move on.

All of this applies to boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, but these are much more intense and separation is more painful.

Keeping close to family and relatives when separated is important. Grandparents and close kin can be a good support, even at the end of a telephone or email.

Bullying and teasing

'Being a new kid you get a hard time.'

Sometimes young people who move will be victims of teasing. *'Sucked in, you had to move.'* If it is fairly mild teasing the best response is probably to ignore it. Bullying, however, can be a serious problem and is something you need to think about if your teenager doesn't want to go to school, loses confidence, has nightmares or shows other signs of stress.

Why do people pick on others?

Bullying comes from a belief that it is OK to act that way.

- Some people believe it is OK to bully people who are different from them, such as people from different races and cultures, people with disabilities, people who are gay or lesbian, or people who are new to a school and vulnerable.
- Sometimes people believe it is OK to bully because they have grown up with violence or harassment in their own lives and have come to believe this is a normal way of relating to others.
- When people have been hurt themselves, they could have low self-esteem. They may start to feel they have no power in their lives. Bullying may make them feel more powerful by controlling others.

Whatever the reason, it is not OK to bully

Victims are sometimes bullied by a group or 'gang' of their peers.

- Bullies may work in groups so they each feel less guilty about the harassment.
- It is easier for them to take less responsibility for the bullying by blaming their friends—for example, 'the others started it … I only joined in.'

- Members of a group might also join in harassing a victim because they are worried that, if they don't, they will become victims themselves.
- Bullies' self-esteem may be low, and being in a group or gang makes them feel more important.

What is the effect of bullying on your teenager?

- Low self-esteem and feelings of sadness, anxiety and loneliness become stronger. They may feel powerless and that they have very little control over their lives.
- They may stay home from school (or wherever the bullying is happening).
- They may develop physical illness, depression and thoughts of suicide. Some people have committed suicide because their lives were made miserable by harassment, and they believed that their situation could never improve.
- Some people may never get over childhood experiences. They may grow up with poorer self-esteem and higher rates of depression than adults who were not bullied as children.

Why pick on me?

Anyone can be bullied, and it may never be clear why they have been singled out as a target. Bullying is much more common than many people believe.

- People who look different from others can sometimes be picked on. This can be because they don't have the clothing or shoes advertised as popular, or because they don't have the 'perfect' look or body shape.
- Bullies often target people who are vulnerable and less able to protect themselves. They may target people who don't have many friends to help them.
- Often bullies will tease victims who react to stress by crying, getting upset or distressed. Bullies often find this 'amusing', and will continue to torment these victims just so they can enjoy watching the way the victim reacts.
- Sometimes people are bullied just because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

What can you do if your teenager is being bullied?

- Remember, *it is not your child's fault*. There is nothing wrong with him. The behaviour of bullies is not OK. Don't fall into the trap of telling your young person to stand up for himself and not be a 'wuss'. If he were in a situation where he could stand up for himself, this would not he happening.
- Keep telling him positive things about himself every day.
- Help him concentrate on positive things and do things that make him feel good. Encourage regular fun activities and things you know he is good at.
- If the bullying is happening at school, use the school's procedures for dealing with harassment, or before and after school. Suggest that your teenager talks to a teacher he thinks will take his complaint seriously, and, if this does not work, speak to the teacher yourself. If necessary, speak to the principal. The school has a duty to make sure students are safe there.
- If your teenager is being bullied on the way to or from school, suggest walking to school with friends if at all possible. Check if there are any safety houses in the area and, if so, where they are.
- If possible, your teenager should walk away before the bullying actually starts.
- Although it is easier said than done, trying to ignore the harassment often works best and does not give the bully the satisfaction of seeing your teenager upset.

- It can also be helpful to take up self-defence classes. These classes not only provide some skills in self-defence, but can also build confidence and self-esteem.

- It is important not to let the matter drop until you are sure your teenager is safe.

By telling someone, you are helping to protect others as well as your child.

What if your child is the bully?

Sometimes when young people are under stress and being bullied they will in turn bully others. If this is happening with your teenager, it is important to deal with it because being a bully can be just as damaging as being the victim.

- Talk to your teenager about it. Find out how she feels and what is underlying the bullying.

- Talk about how victims of the bullying feel. Young people who bully sometimes have problems seeing other people's point of view. The consequences to others of bullying can be serious and long-term.

- In either case it is important to manage your own anger so you are teaching your young people positive ways to deal with anger.

- If you feel that your teenager is not able to deal with her anger, find out about anger management courses.

- Make it clear that violence and abuse are not an OK way to sort things out. They are illegal.

- Remember that studies show that children and young people who bully others are more likely to end up in trouble as adults.

Teach your teenagers that it is not strong or manly to bully others, but at the same time be available and willing to help your teenagers with whatever is worrying them.

Behaviour

When your teenager has a behaviour problem think about whether this is normal teenage behaviour, or because of the move, or both. Don't always blame the move and feel guilty; just work on dealing with the problem.

Everyone, but especially young people, expresses their feelings through their behaviour. They tell you what they are feeling and thinking even if they don't say it in words. When young people are under stress—as they are likely to be during a move, especially if their parents, too, are feeling stressed—they may 'act out', slam doors and yell 'I don't want to be here'. Sometimes this is because something else has gone wrong in their lives that day and they just want to blame someone or something. Remind yourself that your teenager is struggling with lots of new feelings and his behaviour could be showing genuine unhappiness which needs your concern.

Their behaviour can play into family problems and stresses (e.g. 'It is all dad's fault', or in a stepfamily, 'It is all [the stepfather's] fault'.) Or sometimes they blame their mothers for going along with the move. This can come as a bit of a shock for parents, especially if their children have been very obedient when younger. Parents who have been used to a workplace where obedience is expected and order is important, may find it particularly difficult to adjust to having teenagers who confront, challenge and disobey. Authoritarian parenting rarely works for teenagers, and is likely to cause open defiance and even escalating into running away or a physical confrontation. *'You're not talking to your troops now; you're talking to me.'*

One father who was confronted in this way by his son over the family move realised that he had to back off. He did that and, when things had cooled down, opened the way to a much better relationship. His son still had some problems with the move but they were able to work together on the best ways to deal with them.

Going to extremes either way doesn't work with teens. If you relax expectations too much because of the move it can make your young people feel less safe and add to behaviour problems, just as it does if you go too far the other way.

Managing behaviour problems

Relationship first

Work on your relationship first, because no discipline with teenagers is successful unless based on a positive relationship. Try to find things they enjoy that you can do together with them; let them plan some outings or 'together' times. Take a genuine interest in what is important to them and what they want to talk about.

Keeping rules

Often the best rules are those you work out with the young people themselves and are renegotiated as they grow older and more responsible. Make sure your rules are reasonable, not just the way you were brought up. However, even this doesn't mean your children will keep the rules. When rules are broken there usually needs to be a consequence. Whatever the consequence, the young person is likely to see it as punishment, so think about what is reasonable. It is not helpful to give in, nor is it helpful to get into a cycle of more and more severe punishments. Set consequences that are short-term so they get a chance to try again. For example, for a younger teenager: 'You came home very late after we agreed on a time, so tomorrow I will pick you up', or 'Tomorrow you will have to stay home.'

All this is part of teenage testing and so, although you might feel hurt when even reasonable agreements are not kept, try not to over-react. Keep in mind that the normal teenage testing is added to by the stresses of the move. However, if behaviour is really getting out of control or there is violence, you need to seek help for your teenager's sake as well as your own.

What you say to yourself makes all the difference to how you manage teenage problems. If you say, 'Why should I put up with this behaviour?' you are likely to act in a way that drags out the battle. If you say to yourself, 'My son is struggling at the moment and I need to work out the best way to sort this out', you will react quite differently. Remember, if you lose your cool, your teenager will almost certainly lose his.

Parents need to be generous in times of stress, but giving up on limits and expectations altogether will not help your teenager. Knowing that you are there and looking out for their wellbeing helps them to feel safe. Never give up on your young person but don't accept being treated badly.

Talking about feelings

*'It sux and it would help if my parents at least **tried** to understand what it's like.'*

Communication is crucial—about everything and especially about feelings.

Moving involves very real losses for young people (and parents) to cope with. The ways they learn to cope will stand them in good stead for all the moves in the rest of their lives.

- There are the predicted losses in friendships and relationships, but others are also important.
- They may lose opportunities for leadership positions in their schools or sporting teams.
- They may lose the opportunity to continue a special interest—play in a band, be in the football team, be part of a local club.
- They may miss out on special excursions or social events they have been looking forward to and are important to them.

Some young people are very enterprising in starting up a new band or interest group, but even then there are real losses involved before they move on to this.

The importance of listening

Talking with a sympathetic listener does help. Young people often find it hard to express their feelings in the family, although they may do so with their friends. Boys especially are likely to be reticent about feelings or dismiss them altogether. Girls are more likely to talk about feelings and give parents opportunities to offer support. However, sometimes young people don't talk at home about their feelings about moving because they want to protect parents and not put more pressure on them. If this is happening, it is helpful if there is another adult whom they trust for them to talk to.

Sometimes parents don't want to talk about difficult subjects with their young people because they know they aren't able to do what their teenager wants. However, even when you can't do what they want, just to feel heard and understood helps.

It is important to accept your teenagers' feelings as being true for them, even if they don't seem logical to you. You can try to make opportunities to talk in different ways—questioning isn't one of them! Nor is giving advice. It is very hard to listen to your child's problems without wanting to come up with solutions. However, quick solutions usually aren't the answer. Often there are no easy solutions. Young people do better and feel better if they come to their own solutions, sometimes with your help. If you offer advice or solutions that don't 'fit' for your teenager, it will make it harder for her to come to you next time because she hasn't done or agreed with what you suggested. Young people need to be reassured that their feelings are normal responses to the stresses involved in moving.

Sometimes parents try to help by talking about how the move affects them. This usually doesn't help, at least until the teenager feels fully understood. It is a common communication problem that, when we say something like 'I have a headache', the other person responds with 'I've had a backache all week'. One teenager said: *'My mother doesn't help by saying she has to go to another workplace. Maybe it's not all about her.'* People, including young people, need to feel that their point of view is understood before you bring in other factors.

Sometimes young people are very open about expressing their feelings but they are feelings you don't want to hear about and involve a lot of anger. One teenager told me, *'I tried talking to my parents; they just grounded me.'* It sounds as if the way this teenager talked to her parents might have been hard for them to listen to because the real feeling came covered up in abuse and anger. It is important for parents to respond to the feeling underneath and not just the anger on top. It is a

bit like a teenager being so angry about something that he throws a brick through a window. It is very easy to respond only to the brick and the broken window and not to the message that comes with the brick.

However difficult it is, listening and showing that you have heard is one of the most important things you can do. If you don't listen, or your teenager doesn't think you are listening, the resentment remains. One adult told me that, even after many years, she still believed her parents had kidnapped her when they moved.

What you can do

The most important thing is to be available for your teenagers, both by being there and by taking a genuine interest in them. It can help if you do some thinking in advance about what you want to say when the subject of moving comes up, so you are not taken by surprise—however, don't let planning what you want to say stop you from listening.

- You can be available when your teenager wants to talk, even if it is at a difficult time.
- You can accept angry or sad or blaming feelings as genuine for them rather than dismissing them or reacting instantly. You may want to put your point of view, but this will be easier and more acceptable if you have really listened first.

Sam: 'I hate you, it is all your fault that we had to come to this stupid place.'

You: 'You're finding it really tough to be here, and you wish I could change things.'

Sam: 'Well, so you could if you really cared anything about me ...'

You: 'What is really the hardest for you here?' ... and so on.

- By resisting the chance to defend yourself or to give a reprimand you are showing that you care and want to understand. Young people need to know that they can talk about anything that concerns them without punishment. Share your feelings as well.
- If you are concerned about your teenager, you might want to try and set up a time to talk. There are some times that give you a better chance of connecting with your teenagers. These include when you are driving them somewhere they want to go, or around bedtime when they are feeling relaxed, or over a milkshake or a coffee. Try not to make a big deal of it. Start with talking about something they are interested in, leave some spaces and see what happens.
- If your teenager seems upset but doesn't want to talk to you, you could say: 'I can see that you aren't feeling OK and that you don't want to talk now. I just want you to know that I love you and want to help and, if you want to talk any time, just tell me.'

Expressing feelings in other ways

- If your teenager is artistic you can provide the materials for him to paint or draw. It doesn't have to be about what is worrying him. Just expressing himself in this way will help.
- Some teens are good at expressing themselves through stories or poetry. If this is your child, you could encourage this.
- Listening to music, or preferably playing an instrument, is a way some people of all ages express feelings.
- Running is an excellent way for some young people to work off angry or upset feelings. Playing sport is another.
- Think about what helps the different people in your family to express feelings and provide opportunities for this.

Managing the hard things

There are some very hard things that moving families have to deal with. One that upsets young people, although often they are part of it, is arguing in the family.

It is very hard to negotiate all the things that need to be worked out without arguments, particularly if some people's needs are not able to be met. Listening respectfully to each other is very important. So is not devaluing different points of view. If everyone's needs are taken seriously, then an effort can be made to meet them and, even if it doesn't always work, everyone feels that their viewpoint is valued.

Sometimes, no matter how well you manage things, the choices are very difficult, especially with teenagers. One thing families may consider is for a young person to stay while the family moves. Another option sometimes considered is for the parent whose work demands it to move while the other parent remains with the children—sometimes called 'married-separated'. The decision is a very individual one and each choice has pros and cons to consider before making a choice.

Whatever decision is made, make sure the teenagers are involved and understand the reasons. Ask if they have any questions. One boy thought he was being sent to boarding school because he was naughty, when in reality it was because his parents thought it would give him a better education.

Married-separated

This option is probably more suited to shorter rather than longer separations.

Positives

- It will give the young people a chance to continue their education with a parent's support and without disrupting their studies.
- It enables close friendships to be maintained, and these are very important to teenagers.

Challenges

- The parental relationship needs to be very strong to be maintained over distance and time. If there is instability in the relationship, teenagers will know it and will be afraid of being separated.
- Sometimes young people who are unhappy about the separation will misbehave in order to get the absent parent back again.
- It is likely to interfere with the bond between the young person and the parent who is away. Sometimes a father who is away thinks it will help if he withdraws and does not interfere, but this distances him from his young people and weakens these bonds.
- It is important to make special times for leavings and homecomings and ways to keep connections strong while one person is away.
- If teenagers have difficult behaviour, as most do from time to time, it is usually easier and more effective if both parents are there to support each other. However, it is important for the absent parent not to just be the disciplinarian. Discipline should be a united approach from both parents and young people need to see this, as they can be very quick to play one off against the other. Discipline should not 'wait until dad comes home!'
- Sometimes young people feel it is their fault that their parents have to live apart, and this can cause guilt, especially if problems arise.
- When the other parent returns at the end of the separation, it is harder for him or her to find a place in the family and there needs to be meaningful discussions and sharing of feelings to make it work.

Young person does not move with the family

Positives

- No disruption of studies, particularly important in the last two years of school.
- For older young people who have developed roots in their environment, it can be a good option.
- It offers a real choice to the young person (but often a very difficult choice).
- For younger teens, and in fact for most teens, it works better if there is a close relative or adult friend to support them.
- For younger teens, boarding school may be an option for some families.
- It works best for young people who have shown the maturity to use independence wisely.

Challenges

- Young people still need family support, even those who deny it. You need to set up a local support network as well.
- Sometimes the teenagers who are most difficult and don't seem to get on well with parents are the ones who need parents most.
- The move may separate brothers and sisters from each other's support.
- If the young person does stay, there needs to be a way for parents to keep in close touch to monitor how he or she is going, especially for younger teens.
- Sometimes this can put pressure on relatives, even if they are very willing to take on the responsibility. This might especially be so for grandparents, if they have very different values from today's youth.
- Boarding school can be lonely and stressful for young teenagers and sometimes there can be bullying. If you choose this option, keep in close touch with your child to ensure she is OK. For some young people it works really well; for others you may need to find another option. Don't hold a young person to a decision she made but is not working out—'You chose this so you will have to live with it.' We all make mistakes.
- It can be hard to get into a private school so, if this is the option, you need to plan well ahead.
- Young people sometimes miss their parents very much, and worry about the family drifting apart.

One boy told me that he loves boarding school; he is able to ring his parents whenever he needs to and a close family friend nearby keeps an eye on him. An 18-year-old moved with his parents, stayed a week, and then went back to his girlfriend. The parents supported him in his choice and helped him to find an apprenticeship.

Parental separation

Moving can be especially hard if the parents have separated and it means the children moving away from one parent. Young people need to know that their parents are supporting each other as well as supporting them. They need a relationship with a caring parent (or parenting person) of their own sex as well as the other sex. They need both the affirmation of their developing personalities and looks as well as to be able to negotiate their way through disagreements. If parents are separated, it is easier for young people to 'play one off against the other', or to run away from difficulties by going to live with the other parent. On the other hand, there are stressful times when a break living somewhere else is helpful. If you are separated and going to live in a new place, it is important to work together to resolve issues as they arise. Sometimes it will be trial and error as you learn what is best in new situations. It is not important to always be right; it is important to be able to work together in supporting children.

When your teen needs more help

It is hard for families when their young people don't settle in the new situation, and the problems get worse, not better, over time. There are some suggestions about when to be concerned in the chapter on parenting teenagers. Here are some other signs that your teenager may not be coping and may need more help:

- not sleeping;
- overeating;
- headaches;
- stomach aches;
- time off school;
- self-harming behaviour; and
- anxiety.

One parent said her teenager worried a great deal. She used to have a lonely lunch—she would sit alone and wander. Her parents arranged for the school to involve her in some lunchtime groups. Keeping busy helped her to stop worrying, and the people in the groups eventually became friends. Sometimes, by listening and helping your child work through the issues, they will be able to overcome their problems. If they are getting worse, not better, seek help.

Fathers who have the major care of teenage girls may find it hard to relate to them, especially if they become upset in discussion. Sometimes fathers don't know that they are louder and more intimidating than they think. Try sitting down with your daughter and telling her you love her and want to help her. With time and gentleness and patience this can be a good time to develop a special relationship. Fathers don't always realise that they are very important to teenage girls. Teenage girls usually also need some female support, so if there is a relative or a mother of a friend available, this would also help.

Mothers with teenage boys need support from a male friend or relative if they are parenting alone. Boys with a mother on her own are more likely to wag school, misbehave, or even become aggressive. A trusted male role model and friend can help prevent this. This could be someone who takes an interest in the boys, does things with them sometimes, and encourages respectful and appropriate behaviour.

An older teenage boy can take on a pseudo-husband role where there is an absent father, and this can exacerbate any marital problems and prevent the young man from moving on with his own life. It is important to facilitate involvement from an uncle, grandfather or family friend to support your teenager if this happens. Let him know that, while you appreciate his help and support, you want him to be making the most of his own life. At the same time show that you are getting on with your own life by going out with friends, joining a group, taking up your interests again, and so on.

Positive learnings from moving

When they move house young people can learn lessons that will stand them in good stead all their lives:

- that predictable changes are easier to manage;
- that new changes can build on knowledge learned from previous changes;
- that meaningful rituals can help at times of change;
- that having special loved people or objects with them helps bridge the change from old to new;
- that, although all changes are stressful, the stress need not be overwhelming when there is caring support;
- that most changes involve grief, and that sad or angry feelings are normal and they can express them safely;
- that grief can take time to resolve and that is OK;
- that they can have some control over changes in their lives;
- that they will be supported over difficult times and can begin to learn to support others at these times;
- that they can feel safe and free to explore in new situations;
- that they can keep some of what they value from the past and look forward to what is valuable in the future; and
- that they have skills and knowledge to deal with new things and the positive learnings from early changes can be transferred to later changes.

Moving can be a positive experience, even with teenagers, and there is much that you can do to help make sure that it is positive for the teenagers in your family.

References

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For further help

Child and Youth Health website: www.cyh.com – youth sections.

Parent helplines in your area.

Let your teenagers know about Kids Helpline (national) 1800 551 800.

Check with your place of work. When staff are relocated there are often services to help them through the workplace.

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Travelling Teens:

A parents' guide to family relocation

Moving house is becoming a more common aspect of modern life; but this does not make it any easier to cope with the many issues that arise—from the everyday practicalities, to the social and emotional challenges involved. Families who are required to relocate face the potentially difficult task of settling each family member into the new environment.
For parents of teenagers, this can be a huge challenge—coping with resistance to leaving old friends, schools and sporting groups, as well as assisting them to find their place in a new setting.

Travelling teens: A parents' guide to family relocation, by experienced parenting author and counsellor Pam Linke, covers the issues that teenagers are likely to be grappling with at this stage of their life. The practical strategies offered are based upon research through surveys of parents and teenagers in families of Australian Defence Force members. This book provides expert advice on how to support teens during the relocation process, and to make what is often a difficult situation into a positive experience. The information and strategies in Travelling teens are relevant to any young people who have to move house, from all walks of life.

Australian Government
Department of Defence

Early Childhood Australia
PO Box 7105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: 02 6242 1800 Fax: 02 6242 1818
Email: eca@earlychildhood.org.au

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